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A PICTURE OF SOVIET RUSSIA

BY CHARLES JOHNSTON

WHILE America's attitude toward the situation in Russia is still in the formative stage, I think that I can render a substantial service to public opinion here by transcribing a picture of the Russia with which we must deal, as painted by a Frenchman of great insight and literary power, one of those extraordinarily lucid minds whose "clear and critical spirit" Clemenceau once described in a happy epigram.

This able and gifted Frenchman, Serge de Chessin, calls his word-picture "The evening twilight of a capital," and he begins by drawing a vivid comparison between dying Petrograd and one of those winter scenes so affected by Russian artists, in which their tendency towards tragical decay expresses itself: miserable villages wrapped in snow, vague silhouettes of churches in the white immensity, a village road scarred by ruts, losing itself in the infinitude of the dead steppes.

Is not the aspect of the streets the truest mirror of a political régime? he asks, and then he draws a telling contrast between the stately vistas of Petrograd, even in the weeks before the revolution, and the ghastly squalor of Soviet Petrograd. But even under the magnificent stage setting mounted by the Tsars, lay concealed the incurable neurasthenia of a people without moral or social resistance, the brutalities of an illiterate proletariat, its anarchical fermentation, all the ugly things which the muttering revolution was preparing to bring forth. These dregs have to-day come to the surface. One would say that, under the murky sky, was passing a procession of dead souls. The dull eyes, the heavy faces, the stooping figures announce a frightful apathy. For many hours, for whole days and nights, men, women, children with empty baskets on their arms, waiting, bent and

haggard, before the shops. Sometimes exhaustion triumphs over these mournful efforts of endurance, and the victim falls, dying of starvation under the hallucinated eyes of an indifferent crowd. After the crises of epilepsy which have convulsed the capital, nothing any longer creates astonishment, neither coffins heaped in dozens on a mud-cart, on their way to the common ditch, nor the food-speculators dragged along the streets wearing under their chins a placard: "I am a thief!" nor the everlasting rattle of rifles, nor the daily lynchings, where the lamp-post takes the place of the gallows, nor the ladies of the old nobility selling newspapers, nor generals picking up crusts, nor the carrion rotting on the sidewalks. *Panis et circenses!* The crowds of Petrograd, incurious after so many circus shows, ask now only for bread and a little rest. Their political stupor is so complete that, during the tragical days of the German offensive, when the shrieking of sirens announced the mobilization of the Red Guard, and enemy airplanes buzzed over the city, the crowds continued, deaf to all national or revolutionary convulsions, their eternal sentry-march before the food shops. This nightmare nihilism was unbroken even by the signature of a catastrophic peace. While Russia was being crucified, the crowd continued to haggle over its rotten herrings and unspeakable bread. In its external aspect, as in its spirit, the capital of the militant revolution, the hearth of world socialism recalls those wretched Russian provincial towns engulfed in coma which Gorky had described with such mortal sadness.

Material privations and the obsession of the Terror have chloroformed all sensibilities. All the amenities, all the conveniences of modern life have disappeared: all automobiles have been requisitioned for the needs of the Bolshevik leaders; telephones have been silenced by increase of cost; trolleys are monopolized by the soldiers; pianos have been taxed out of existence. From day to day a dense population of three millions expects to be left without water or light. Coal and wood are almost absolutely lacking. The free citizen of Trotzky's Commune aspires only to vegetate in obscurity, happy when he comes home uninjured, like prehistoric man returning to his cave, bent double to escape from blows, grasping a meagre pittance in his convulsive fingers. Famine displaces all other fears. The villages now refuse contemptuously the worthless paper currency and demand coin, cloth,

shoes, something that is more than a souvenir. Certain regions are willing to send carloads of grain against an equal number of carloads of Bolshevik hostages. Others do not shrink from ghastly jests, like sending to Petrograd closed cars containing not grain but heaped-up corpses, victims of the civil war.

By their own confession the Bolsheviks are forced "to organize famine," but, as always, along demagogic lines: denunciation of the bourgeois hiding behind his hoards, fruitless house-to-house searches, Red Guard forays into the villages, where the peasants bury the last remnant of their food. More butcheries, more lynchings. In vain is the capital soaked with blood and riddled with lead: bread is not to be had and a small loaf brings thirty rubles; deaths from typhoid reach sixty per cent; in the hospitals, without proper food, without medicines, without soap, the sick die in swarms; cases of strange paralysis, due to malnutrition, ravage the population; along once magnificent Nevsky Prospect, when a horse falls, dying of starvation, the people rush forward to try to snatch a fragment of its leathery flesh from the street curs.

Isolated from the outer world, cut off from its centers of supplies, without trade, without communications, the capital, like all starvelings, is feeding, as death approaches, on its own tissues. Everything is being sold. Stupifying deals, trades recalling the ghettos, supply a wraith of economic life. The celebrated "louse-market" swarms with a heterogeneous mob, which jostles together in a chaos of cries, quarrels and oaths. Reduced officers, shabby officials, former Court dignitaries timidly offer the last of their possessions. But the soldier's cloak dominates, the army has been metamorphosed into a squirming mass of worm-eaten hawkers, commissionaires ready for any dirty work. It is here, in the "louse-market," in the presence of these soldiers who brawl and gesticulate against a leprous background of filthy shops, among putrid exhalations, clammy rags, the sordid merchandise of the market-stalls, that one experiences a gnawing at the heart, the feeling of a destruction well-nigh irreparable. . . . A drunken soldier offers his mother for sale. Has he not already sold his motherland?

M. de Chessin, who has already drawn an excellent illustration from Russian painting, now finds another in Russian literature. It is, he says, during these walks through the

revolutionary capital that one finally comes to understand certain novels of Dostoyevsky: a demoniacal saraband of lusts let loose, of political hatreds, of cloudy rhetoric, haggard faces, convulsive gestures, against a background of gray and of desperate sadness.

Interpreted by the plebs, Lenin's popularized Marxism transforms Petrograd, at nightfall, into a cut-throat city, where the appearance of a round hat is enough to draw a fusillade of rifle-fire. Furtive shadows glide through the dusk, along the deserted streets, watching each other with eyes of terror, shrinking against the walls to escape the armed groups that pass with the clatter of heavy boots. Under the wan light of the street lamps, you see perpetually marked out the same snub-nosed mujik faces, the red topknots on their caps, the rifles slung across their shoulders. Apaches, drawn by the scent of social prey, Bolshevik janissaries, carrying out the high commands of Smolny; fraternally united, with cigarettes in their mouths, their eyes lit with greed, they are going to "work," to "expropriate the expropriators," according to Lenin's formula, and to "consolidate the revolution" by assassination.

Will it ever be possible, asks M. de Chessin, to evoke in all their turpitude, in all their horror, the nightmares of Petrograd, to strip from "the Soviet Republic" its resounding phrases and Phrygian banners, to show it stark naked, as it is, bloodstained, insane, monstrous in its paroxysms?

The last decrees of wholesale confiscation, the execution of recalcitrants on the spot, the extermination of "counter-revolutionists," the forced labor imposed on capitalists, have legalized in advance every madness and every abjection. Petrograd is already far from the individual whims of pick-pockets, the systematic holding up of people in the streets, ambushes on the bridges, raids on the banks. Pillage and assassination are to-day shielded under governmental decrees and the decisive assault against reaction. All social restraints are finally broken. Under pretext of search, apartments are robbed; travellers in the Hôtel de l'Europe are searched daily; all sums, however insignificant, are confiscated for the State. Under the pretext of equality, an order has just been issued to the bourgeois tenants of apartments in the Wyborg quarter—the Faubourg Saint-Antoine of the Russian revolution—to present themselves, on pain of death, at the barracks, the women to wash the floors, the men to clean the stables.

Encouraged by such decrees, there is a rich harvest of denunciations: half the city suspects the other half of conspiring against the Soviets, of hoarding gold, of speculating in food. Each morning the newspapers briefly chronicle the capital punishments inflicted the day before, in the name of the people. And, however jaded public opinion may be, by the floods of blood poured out on the snow of Petrograd, it could not restrain a shudder of anguish and terror at one of these dramas: the discovery, in an empty lot, of the bodies of seven young men, officers and students, three of whom were brothers, Frenchmen, shot by the Red Guard on a false accusation of plotting counter-revolution. On the next day the three Frenchmen were to go back to their regiment in France.

In the frightful chaos into which Bolshevism has thrown these dull brains, these corroded souls, the foulest fancies take shape. At Pavlovsk, the pretty summer suburb of fashionable Petrograd, a number of Chinese workmen were tortured and then put to death with all the refined cruelty of the Celestial Empire, by the Red Guard and the local Soviet, in execution of a judgment improvised by a Chinaman. . . .

This is the Russia we are called on to help; for conditions in Petrograd are only a more dramatic summary of conditions everywhere. Throughout the whole vast realm, the same spirit is dominant.

And, the moment we consider the question of aid, of the reconstruction, let us say, of Russia's agriculture, we are forced to face the fact that no efforts we may make can possibly bear a harvest, in the literal sense, before the summer and autumn of 1919. The question is, what will happen in Russia, and to Russia, in the intervening months?

The Germans, as we know, found hardly any grain. In the Spring of 1917, in the first ecstasies of the revolution, none of the mujiks thought of working, of planting prosaic wheat or rye: and, of the slender crops that were planted, for the most part by the larger owners of land, who were both more intelligent and more skillful, very much was destroyed in wanton frenzy by the peasants when, in the name of the revolution, they sacked the homes of the larger landowners, and cut the owners' throats. In the meantime, since the land question as regards themselves was unsettled, the equal division of all lands not having been carried out, very

few peasants were willing to risk the planting of crops in the Spring of the present year for someone else to reap; with the result that, in the months immediately ahead of us, and long before any possible work of the Russian mission could bear fruit, Russia is likely to pass through a famine even worse than that which threatens Austria and Turkey.

That able and impartial Scotsman, Mackenzie Wallace, author of the best single volume ever written on Russia, long ago recorded the observation that, immediately after the Emancipation of the Serfs, in 1861, Russian agriculture as a whole began to deteriorate; the reason was, that large masses of emancipated peasants no longer had the intelligent supervision of their former lords; and so they fell back into their hopelessly medieval tillage, which seems planned to yield the smallest possible output for each acre. But these former lords, and most effective guides, of the peasant masses retained their personal estates, which they proceeded to work with considerable energy and skill, forming islands of thrift and foresight and science in the vast sea of mujik incompetence.

These possible saviors of Russia were, however, doomed. For two generations, Revolutionary Socialism had been pointing at them the finger of denunciation and hatred; philosophical anarchists like Kropotkin and Tolstoi had been preaching the same doctrine, until it had been driven into the slow intelligence of the mujik that the larger owner of land, simply because he was better off, was thereby robbing the mujik; and the mujik clearly visualized, as his perquisite in the projected revolution, the pleasant task of cutting up his wealthier neighbor's land and dividing the pieces among his fellow-villagers. The Lenin-Trotsky gang gained power, and have continued to hold power, so far as the peasants are concerned, simply by doing this one thing: "authorizing" the peasants to rob and murder their more successful neighbors, which the peasants appear to have done with great thoroughness and determination.

In this way, agricultural Russia knocked out its own brains, as the Russian army had earlier knocked out its own brains, under the auspices of Alexander Kerensky, who, as War Minister, forwarded to the Russian armies the Soviet "Order," which practically incited the men in the ranks to make an end of their officers. This shooting of officers was begun, with the connivance of the Provisional Government

of Prince Lvoff, Gutchkoff, Rodzianko and Kerensky, immediately after the forced abdication of the Emperor Nicholas.

Well, agricultural Russia knocked out its own brains. Besides being criminal, it was a foolish thing to do; and widespread starvation, within no long time, seems certain to be the penalty. Besides murdering the owners of larger estates, the triumphant mujiks showed their sovereign liberty by burning the granaries and smashing the agricultural machinery, much of it of American make, which had been one means of the larger landowners' success. The American people is, therefore, invited, by Kropotkin, the philosophical anarchist, among others, to lend agricultural brains to replace the brains that Russia once possessed, but has, under the inspiration of Revolutionary Socialism, destroyed; to restore enormous quantities of grain, which the peasants so wantonly burned; to replace the agricultural machinery which they smashed in a frenzy of criminal folly.

We must not blame the mujik in his elemental stupidity. All these acts were the quite logical outcome of those doctrines of Socialism under whose inspiration the Russian revolution was really carried out, the Constitutionalist leaders being merely stalking horses and tools of the real revolutionists. The mujik was taught that any man who held more land than he did was thereby a robber and a criminal, and that he, the mujik, must "rob the robber." At the same time, the workman was being taught that the factory owner, the "bourgeois capitalist," was his deadly enemy, a thief and a robber, and that the factory and everything in it was really the property of the workman. It is almost superfluous to go over these doctrines; they have appeared in the platforms of our own Socialists for decades; they appear there still. But there is this justification for repeating them once more: In Russia, thanks to the revolution, they are in full force; while in the United States, they are still no more than the pious hope of the Socialist party, though certain more adventurous Comrades, calling themselves by another name, have gone in for "action" along Russian lines.

Unfortunately, the Socialist elixir does not seem to have turned all things Russian into gold. The workman is not suddenly enriched, though the factory-owner is ruined. In fact, the factory is at a standstill, to the large detriment of the machinery, and the workman rejoices in a "no-hour day"

so far as work goes, or pay either. He, too, like the mujik, is facing starvation; and we are to try to rehabilitate him also.

It would be interesting to try to work out the problem: on what terms could Americans practically help Russian workmen, whose sluggish consciousness was altogether preoccupied with the conviction that the capitalist is no better than a criminal; that everything, the factory, its output, its profits, belong of right to the workman and should be enjoyed by him; he, in the meantime, working no longer than he pleases, say, three or four hours a day. It is a somewhat perplexing problem; I confess I am not in possession of the answer. But it seems clear that things would of necessity move somewhat slowly.

Let us try if we can get a little more light by looking at our problem from a different direction. Let us say that it is a question, not so much of reorganizing Russian agriculture and Russian industry—both having been put out of operation not by any hostile agencies but by the Russian workmen and peasants themselves; but that we are concerned rather with the problem of helping and strengthening those elements in Russia, if there are any, which are loyal to the cause of the Allies, which deplore the defection of the Russian army, and which ardently desire to see a new Russian army fighting against Germany.

But what elements in Russia are on our side? What elements did, in fact, fight valiantly against Germany and Austria from the very outset of the war? First of all, the Emperor Nicholas and that superb soldier the Grand Duke Nicholas. We were told—and it won immediate sympathy here for the Russian revolution—that the Emperor Nicholas was on the eve of betraying the Entente cause, by making a separate peace with Germany. Is there not something illuminating in the fact that the very men who made this accusation have in fact concluded that traitorous separate peace? But we have the word of the British Ambassador—given with inexplicable slowness—that the story was a lie; it was a piece of Socialist slander, of Bolshevik propaganda, from the very outset. And the accusation, repeated every week or two in our papers, that the Romanoffs are conspiring with the Kaiser for the restoration of the monarchy—that is equally a lie, a piece of Bolshevik propaganda, the fabrication of those who still wish “to save Russia for Socialism.” And that lie is even more ridiculous in view of Germany’s present

effort to prove that the Emperor Nicholas was the real engineer of the war against Germany and Austria, with France meekly seconding him and England a weakly acquiescent third. The Emperor Nicholas was, then, at once secretly pro-German and Germany's deadliest enemy?

The plain truth is that, so long as the imperial power held, Russia fought heroically, in the face of bitter sacrifices, for the Allied cause; and that on the day after the Emperor's forced abdication, the collapse of the Russian army began, a collapse directly engineered by the Socialists acting through Kerensky. Kerensky seems to have expected that his words could neutralize his acts. He is still a convinced Socialist; perhaps he still believes that Russia can be saved by blowing soap-bubbles. But the point is that it was the imperial power in Russia that fought for the Allies, contributing to the victory of the Marne, drawing off the first Austrian descent upon Italy, while it was the Socialists in Russia who first destroyed the army and then made a shameful peace—a peace so shameful, that even Trotsky had not the face to read its terms. How shall we stand in the eye of honor if we now go to Russia and deliberately ignore the Entente's loyal ally through three terrible years—and if we do this in deference to Socialist clamor? It is an outrage that the Allies should lose the sword of such a soldier as the Grand Duke Nicholas, the liberator of Armenia, which the Socialists have now given back to Turkish slavery.

We must, therefore, look the matter in the face. The classes in Russia who were and are our friends—the friends of the Allied cause—are the classes which the revolution has ground down into the dust. The real engineers of the revolution—not the stalking horses—had betrayed the Allied cause even before the revolution began. Moreover, many of these revolutionary leaders have lived here in America; but, far from admiring and desiring our democratic liberty, they scoff at American institutions, and eagerly plan to transmit to us all the blessings of Soviet Socialism which they enjoy themselves. They will accept money from us, they will accept food, but they will have nothing to do with American principles or ideals. Their own Socialist schemes they infinitely prefer.

In our considerations, so far, we have said very little about the Man in Possession—the Soviet Socialist, the Bolshevik. But the man in possession will hardly consent to be

ignored. He is, indeed, tremendously busy at this moment, trying to stamp out and destroy whatever armed forces in Russia still cling to the cause of the Allies; trying to cut off the Czecho-Slovak regiments who are endeavoring to make their way to the Italian and French fronts by way of Vladivostok and the Pacific. Thus the Soviets are giving active military aid to our enemies. Is it quite reasonable to suppose that they will, at the same time, accord a hearty welcome to ourselves?

The Soviet Government has, as we have just seen, handed over to Germany the whole of Russia's minerals, "in order to pay the money which it owes to Germany." But the Soviet Government has also promised Germany large contributions of Russian wheat and rye. Let us suppose that the American mission should be instrumental in producing a large output of Russian wheat and rye by reorganizing Russian agriculture, and that the Soviet Government, the *de facto* Government of Russia, should straightway commandeer the said grain "in order to pay what it owes to Germany." That is an entirely probable, nay, a practically certain contingency, so long as German influence over the Soviets remains what it is. But, in such an event, what should we do? What could we do? This situation has been put into a happy phrase by an able American correspondent, Mr. Harold Williams: "All suggestions that we should weave political incantations in collusion with those shadows of the night side of Germany, the Bolsheviki," will turn out to be "simply a gratuitous and suicidal method of breaking down our own blockade."

It seems to me that we should begin by getting a clear view of the moral issues. Do we wish to support in Russia the principles of the Allies, the principles of justice and liberty through justice? Or do we wish "to save Russia for Germanic Socialism?"

CHARLES JOHNSTON.